



Invitation for submissions on early childhood care and education

The Department of Education and Skills is inviting submissions from all interested parties (childcare practitioners, students, parents, early childhood employers, etc) on the education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in early childhood care and education.

The purpose of this review is to ensure that such education and training programmes provide childcare practitioners with appropriate competencies, knowledge and skills to support the educational development of children in early years services including full and part-time care, sessional services and childminders. While recognising that the care and education of young children should be provided holistically, this review is particularly focussed on children's educational development.

The review does not include programmes that lead to qualifications as a primary teacher.

A submissions template, in the form of a number of key questions, is attached. You are invited to provide your views on each question. There is also a space at the end of the template for any other more general comments.

All information provided in response to this questionnaire will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be used or shared for any other purposes.

The deadline for return of submissions is **10 April 2015**. The completed template can be returned by any of the following means:

- Completed on-line through survey monkey [details to be inserted]
- Completed electronically and emailed to: earlychildhood@education.gov.ie
- Sent by hardcopy to the following address: Tony Gaynor, Floor 2, Block 2, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.

Any queries on this questionnaire, or the review, can be directed to Dr. Tony Gaynor, Early Years Education Policy Unit at (01) 8896402 or tony_gaynor@education.gov.ie

Template for submissions

Your name:

Start Strong

Contact email address (if applicable):

policy@startstrong.ie

How would you best describe your role in relation to Early Childhood Care and Education (e.g., childcare practitioner, student, parent, academic, employer etc).

Start Strong is a coalition of organisations campaigning for high quality early care and education for all children in Ireland.

Outlined below are 16 questions related to early childhood care and education. You are invited to provide your feedback on each question. There is also a space at the end for any other more general comments you may wish to make on the issue of early childhood care and education.

1. What do you see as the main purpose of early childhood care and education?

In children's early years, care and education are inextricably linked. Young children develop, learn and are nurtured in many places: in their own homes – with their parents and families – in the homes of their grandparents, other relatives and childminders, and in centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí.

However, this questionnaire is concerned primarily with the provision of early care and education services, rather than home settings, so we will answer this and the remaining questions in relation to the provision of early years services.

Start Strong, which works from a children's rights perspective, sees the main purpose of early care and education services as to promote both children's well-being – here and now – and their development, both short-term and long-term.

We see early care and education as the first, foundational stage of the education system.

Many families also choose to use early care and education services as a means of facilitating parental participation in employment, education or training. While Start Strong recognises that early care and education services are often used as a labour market support, and that parental employment is an important means of protecting children against poverty, it is

essential that children's interests come first in the development of Government policy on early care and education.

In addition, for some families – especially vulnerable families experiencing high levels of disadvantage or with complex needs – early care and education services can play an important role in family support, especially when they work in combination with health and parenting supports.

2. What do you see as the main benefits of early childhood care and education?

If they are of high quality, early care and education services can bring a wide range of benefits: to children, to the economy, and to society. However, if they are of low quality, then children do not benefit, and can suffer harm.

The earliest life experiences are critical in forming the skills and dispositions that are essential if children are to have firm foundations on which they can build their lives.

International research has demonstrated that quality early care and education brings a wide range of benefits for children's well-being and for their social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and language development. The benefits to children of quality care and education in their early years are both widespread and long-lasting. While the benefits are greatest for disadvantaged children, all children benefit – provided the early care and education services are of high quality.

Investment in young children also has high economic and social returns, because its impact on children's skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime. While investment in human capital is essential at all levels of the education system, the returns are highest for education and supports in the earliest years. Nobel Prizewinning economist Professor James Heckman and others have demonstrated that the benefits are cumulative over the life-course: those who receive quality care and education in early childhood make more effective use of primary, secondary and tertiary education.

In addition, public investment in care and education for young children can help make society fairer and more equitable through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality, in particular through helping to reduce child poverty and to break the inter-generational cycle of social exclusion.

3. What are the main strengths currently associated with early childhood care and education provision?

The main strengths of early care and education provision in Ireland are:

- Some services are of high quality. There is little data available on the quality of services in Ireland, but what evidence there is suggests that while some services fail to meet minimum standards set out in the Regulations, at the same time some services meet the highest standards. The small number of services that have achieved Síolta validation (47 by June 2013, according to the Final Report on the Síolta QAP) have been recognised as high quality services. The very limited roll-out of Síolta means that further services that are achieving high quality standards have not yet won recognition.
- The fact that some services are of high quality in spite of a very low level of public investment, and poor wages and working conditions for those working in the sector, reflects the presence of many dedicated, committed individuals working in early care and education services, and a focus on children's well-being and needs.
- In Síolta and Aistear, we have two excellent frameworks to support the delivery of high quality services. If rolled out nationally, they could provide the basis for a high quality system of early care and education provision.
- Professionalisation of the early years workforce has progressed significantly in recent years. While average qualification levels are still well below international standards, and further progress is severely constrained by low wages and poor working conditions, in spite of these barriers qualification levels have risen. The proportion of staff who have not achieved Level 5 qualifications has fallen significantly (from 24% in 2011 to 13% in 2013), and the proportion of graduates rose fractionally from 12% in 2012 to 13.5% in 2013, supported to some extent by Government policy through the Higher Capitation Grant.
- An infrastructure of services and supports. As a result of significant capital investment – both public and private – over the last 15 years, there is now a substantial infrastructure of early care and education services in many areas of the country, as well as a range of organisations at both national (VCO, Better Start) and county (CCCs) levels providing supports for service provision.

4. What are the main challenges currently associated with early childhood care and education provision?

The central challenge associated with early care and education provision in Ireland today is the very low level of public funding. In total the Irish Government invests less than 0.2% GDP per annum in early care and education services, which is one of the lowest spending levels in Europe, and is a small fraction of the 0.8% GDP that is invested on average in OECD

countries, and is an even smaller fraction of the investment level in countries with the highest quality provision (such as the Nordic countries, which all invest in excess of 1% GDP per annum). The low level of investment in Ireland is the principal cause of the many other challenges that early years provision in Ireland faces today, including:

- Variable quality and the lack of assurance of quality. While some services achieve high quality standards, many do not. The limited data available indicates that many services are of low quality, which can be harmful to children.
- Qualification levels that are low by international standards, which reflects the low wages and poor working conditions in the sector, as well as the absence of public funding to support existing workers to progress to graduate-level qualifications.
- Limited supports for quality. In particular, public funding schemes such as the Free Pre-School Year provide no payment for non-core hours, meaning that there is no paid time for planning and preparation, for Continuing Professional Development, or for documenting work or engaging with parents. In addition, the Síolta and Aistear national frameworks have still not been rolled out nationally, even though they were published in 2006 and 2009 respectively.
- A weak inspection regime. The Pre-School Regulations primarily focus on health and safety issues, rather than children's learning and development, and the Inspectors are not required to be qualified in early care and education. The recent establishment of a parallel inspection process focused on early education, and to be staffed by inspectors with qualifications and expertise in early education, appears to be designed to compensate for these weaknesses of the Pre-School Inspectorate. However, the new inspectors will operate as a parallel service limited to looking at the Free Pre-School Year, rather than resulting in the reform of the inspectorate, thus limiting their impact and potentially creating confusion.
- Inequity in access to services. Firstly, while the Free Pre-School Year has achieved very high take-up, take-up appears to be lower among specific groups of children. In particular, there is some evidence that some children with disabilities cannot access places because services feel they do not have sufficient resources to support those children. And anecdotal evidence suggests that participation rates are lower among Roma and Traveller children, who are often among the most disadvantaged in society and stand to benefit the most from participation in early care and education services. Secondly, outside the Free Pre-School Year early care and education services in Ireland are among the expensive to parents in any European country, and are unaffordable to many families.
- Unregulated childminding. A large proportion of early care and education provision in Ireland is delivered by childminders, nearly all of whom are unregulated and unsupported.
- Weak governance. Responsibility for Government policy on early care and education is split between Government Departments, in particular DES and DCYA, with other Government departments also playing a role (e.g. DSP for some funding schemes, and the HSE for provision of supports to many young children with disabilities). In addition, the

continued delay in publishing a National Early Years Strategy means that there is no overarching vision or strategy to guide Government policies in the area.

- ‘Split system’, with higher quality standards for aspects of provision viewed as ‘early education’ (in particular the Free Pre-School Year) and lower quality standards for aspects of provision viewed as ‘childcare’ (in particular, care and education for under-3s). This split is exemplified in the decision announced in October 2014 to limit the new ‘education-focused’ DES inspectors to looking at the Free Pre-School Year, which appears to imply that the Free Pre-School Year is the only element of early years provision that is educational. Similarly, it is exemplified in the higher qualification requirement for leaders in the Free Pre-School Year (Level 6) than for other early years leaders (Level 5).
- Lack of national data, especially on the quality of provision and on access to services (in particular for children from minority and disadvantaged groups), as well as an absence of data on the extent and nature of childminding.
- Public and political perceptions. While there is growing recognition of the role of early care and education services in children’s learning and development, early care and education is still often seen as a labour market issue, rather than as a children’s rights issue.

5. What actions, if any, are required to address those challenges?

As the very low level of public funding lies at the root of most of the challenges, a large increase in the level of public funding is the key to addressing those challenges. To achieve international standards in early care and education provision, it will be necessary to raise the level of funding from the current level (less than 0.2% GDP) towards the OECD average (0.8% GDP) and then on to the international benchmark of 1% GDP. Increasing public funding will make possible the other reforms that are needed to address the challenges identified above, including:

- Moving towards a new Irish model of provision, in which early care and education services are a profession delivering a public service, supported by public funding, rather than the current ‘market’ model of provision.
- Professionalisation of the early years workforce. We need to move progressively towards graduate-led provision, setting timelines for further increases in minimum qualifications, and for the achievement of fully graduate-led services. Professionalisation needs to be supported by financial support for existing workers to progress towards Level 7 and 8 qualifications, and by the introduction of salary scales as a condition of public funding, with parity with school teachers for similarly qualified staff (as in New Zealand), including payment for non-core hours.
- Linking public funding to quality. Public funding should be closely tied to the quality of services. Funding must be sufficient to deliver high quality services. And funding should

be used as a lever to improve quality, with higher capitation levels where quality is higher, and withdrawal of funding where standards are not met.

- Reform and strengthening of the inspection regime. A new, reformed inspectorate should focus on a broad understanding of quality, should be staffed with inspectors who are both qualified and experienced in early care and education, and should be located within an agency that focuses specifically on regulation and inspection, such as HIQA. The new Inspectorate should be formed on the basis of the reform and merging of the Tusla Inspectorate with the early childhood education inspectors being appointed by the Department of Education and Skills.
- Measures to address the affordability of early care and education services should take the form of public subsidies, with public funding linked to the quality of provision, so that we can achieve the 'double dividend' of affordability and high quality at the same time. Affordability should not be addressed through the taxation system, as tax measures (such as childcare tax credits) cannot deliver improvements in the quality of provision.
- Merge policy responsibility for early care and education into a single Department.
- Regulate and support all paid childminders.
- Publish and implement an ambitious National Early Years Strategy, in line with the recommendations set out in the report of the Expert Advisory Group on the National Early Years Strategy, *Right from the Start*.

6. What are the key competences, knowledge areas or skills that are required to support children's educational development in early years settings?

As the CoRe report (University of East London and Universiteit Gent, 2011, *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care – A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture*) argues, "competence" in the early childhood education and care context has to be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system' (p.21). So we will make little progress if we attempt to strengthen the knowledge and skills of individual educators without also addressing the wider policy issues that are involved in building a 'competent system'.

Drawing on a review of the international literature, the CoRe report identifies four dimensions of a 'competent system':

1. Individual level - the individual early years educator.
2. Institutional and team level – e.g. the team of educators working within a setting.
3. Inter-institutional level – the connections between different agencies and organisations.

4. Level of governance – the systems at national or regional level that resource early care and education and that provide for integrated policies.

At the level of individual competences, the CoRe report stresses the central importance of critical reflection – the ability of the individual to connect their knowledge, practice and values, and to engage in a ‘continuous learning process: a process through which one’s own practices and beliefs are constantly questioned in relation to changing contexts’ (p.35)

Specific domains of knowledge / practice / values that are identified in the CoRe report as being competence requirements for the individual educator include:

- A holistic understanding of the various developmental aspects of children (cognitive, social, emotional, creative etc.)
- Children’s different strategies of learning.
- Communication with children and participation.
- Working with parents and local communities.
- Team working.
- Working in contexts of diversity.
- Understanding early care and education in the broader local, national and international context, including a rights-based approach.
- Health, care, and social protection.

7. Are there any additional competencies, knowledge areas or skills that should be included or expanded within existing education and training programmes that lead to early years qualifications?

Start Strong is not in a position to comment on the content of existing education and training programmes in Ireland.

As an approach to addressing this question, we recommend systematic comparison of existing education and training programmes with:

- a) The competences (knowledge, practices and values) identified in the CoRe report.
- b) The principles, standards and practices identified in Síolta and Aistear.

8. How well do current education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in early childhood care and education adequately prepare childcare practitioners to support the educational development of children in early years settings?

Start Strong is not in a position to comment on the content of existing education and training programmes in Ireland.

It is important to recognise, however, that the effectiveness of education and training programmes in supporting educators depends not just on the content of programmes, but also on:

- Who is delivering the programmes. There is currently no general requirement that those delivering most training programmes should themselves be qualified and experienced in early care and education.
- Accessibility of the programmes, which requires funding to participate in programmes, paid time to engage in regular CPD or higher education, and compatibility of programmes with work (e.g. flexibility in hours and locations).

9. What are your views on the quality of the education currently provided to children in early years settings (not including infant classes in primary schools or Early Start)?

There is no official data on the quality of early care and education services in Ireland, and – as a result of the exemption of most childminders from regulation – there is no data at all on the quality of childminding. What evidence there is on centre-based services suggests that the quality of early care and education is very variable.

Evidence for this comes from three sources:

1. *Observations of services.* A research study was recently published that used the ECERS/E rating scale to assess the quality of curriculum in 26 randomly selected Irish pre-school settings (G. Neylon (2014) 'An analysis of Irish pre-school practice and pedagogy using the early childhood environmental four curricular subscales', in *Irish Educational Studies*, vol.33, issue 1). On a scale from 1 ("inadequate") to 7 ("excellent") the 26 settings were on average rated 3.79 for literacy, 3.23 for maths, 1.54 for science and environment, and 2.35 for diversity. Of the sub-scales, the highest average score was for "talking and listening" (4.81) and the lowest was for the engagement of children with food preparation (just 0.15 on the scale from 1 to 7). According to the terminology of the international ECERS/E scale, practice in the 26 settings in relation to literacy and maths is "minimal", and practice in relation to science, environment and diversity is "inadequate".

2. *Evidence from inspection reports.* Reports on inspections, as currently organised, give only a partial assessment of the quality of services. They only assess quality by reference to the

Pre-School Regulations, which as noted above focus mainly on health and safety issues. And they only involve assessments made by the Pre-School Inspectors (who are Public Health Nurses, and therefore may not be fully qualified to assess children's learning and development) as recorded in the inspection reports. In spite of those limitations, inspection reports do tell us part of the story. Tusla – the Child and Family Agency – in 2014 published its first analysis of the quality of pre-school services as revealed in inspection reports. The research, which was commissioned in the wake of the May 2013 Prime Time investigation, *A Breach of Trust*, suggests that quality is variable. While the majority of services are compliant with all or most of the regulations, a significant minority of services are non-compliant with a large number of regulations. While 24% of services are compliant with all regulations assessed, the majority of services are non-compliant with between 1 and 10 regulations, and 6.5% of services (i.e. about 300 services) are non-compliant with 11 or more of the 27 regulations assessed.

3. *Evidence from qualification levels.* Given the central importance of the professional skills of early childhood educators in achieving high quality standards, a proxy measure of quality is the professional qualifications of educators. However, while 24% of services have a graduate staff member leading the Free Pre-School Year, there is evidence that the graduates tend to be placed with older age groups (such as the Pre-School Year) rather than with younger children. The overall proportion of early years staff who are qualified to Level 7 or above is only 13.5%, well below the CoRe international benchmark of 60%.

10. What are the main factors that impact on the quality of education provided to children in early years settings?

The overarching factor that impacts on quality is the level of public investment in early years settings which, as noted above, is very low in Ireland by international standards (less than 0.2% GDP per annum, compared to the OECD average of 0.8% GDP). The low level of investment in turn shapes the factors that directly impact on quality, including:

- Low qualification levels, which reflect the low wages and poor working conditions in the sector, as well as the absence of public funding to support existing workers to progress to graduate-level qualifications.
- Limited supports for quality, including: no payment for non-core hours, meaning that there is no paid time for planning and preparation, for Continuing Professional Development, or for documenting work or engaging with parents. In addition, the Síolta and Aistear national frameworks have still not been rolled out nationally.
- The inspection regime, which focuses on health and safety issues, rather than children's learning and development, with Inspectors not required to be qualified in early care and education. The recent establishment of a parallel inspection process focused on early education, and to be staffed by inspectors with qualifications and expertise in early

education, appears to be designed to compensate for these weaknesses of the Pre-School Inspectorate. However, as noted above, the new inspectors will operate as a parallel service limited to looking at the Free Pre-School Year, rather than resulting in the reform of the inspectorate, thus limiting their impact and potentially creating confusion.

- Worsening of the adult-child ratio for the Free Pre-School Year in September 2012 from 1:10 to 1:11. For young children, ratios are a key concern, affecting the attention each child can receive and the nature of adult-child interactions.
- Unregulated childminding. A large proportion of early care and education provision in Ireland is delivered by childminders, nearly all of whom are unregulated and unsupported.

11. What steps are necessary to further strengthen the quality of early childhood care and education?

As the very low level of public funding is the overarching factor impacting on quality, a large increase in public funding is the key to strengthening quality, moving from the current level of funding (less than 0.2% GDP) towards the OECD average (0.8% GDP) and then on to the international benchmark of 1% GDP. Increasing public funding will make possible the other reforms that are needed to strengthen quality, including:

- Moving towards a new Irish model of provision, in which early care and education services are a profession delivering a public service, supported by public funding, rather than the current 'market' model of provision.
- Professionalisation of the early years workforce. We need to move progressively towards graduate-led provision, setting timelines for further increases in minimum qualifications, and for the achievement of fully graduate-led services. Professionalisation needs to be supported by financial support for existing workers to progress towards Level 7 and 8 qualifications, and by the introduction of salary scales as a condition of public funding, with parity with school teachers for similarly qualified staff (as in New Zealand), including payment for non-core hours.
- Linking public funding to quality. Public funding should be closely tied to the quality of services. Funding must be sufficient to deliver high quality services. And funding should be used as a lever to improve quality, with higher capitation levels where quality is higher, and withdrawal of funding where standards are not met.
- Reform and strengthening of the inspection regime. A new, reformed inspectorate should focus on a broad understanding of quality, should be staffed with inspectors who are both qualified and experienced in early care and education, and should be located within an agency that focuses specifically on regulation and inspection, such as HIQA. The new

Inspectorate should be formed on the basis of the reform and merging of the Tusla Inspectorate with the early childhood education inspectors being appointed by the Department of Education and Skills.

- Measures to address the affordability of early care and education services should take the form of public subsidies, with public funding linked to the quality of provision, so that we can achieve the ‘double dividend’ of affordability and high quality at the same time. Affordability should not be addressed through the taxation system, as tax measures (such as childcare tax credits) cannot deliver improvements in the quality of provision.
- Merge policy responsibility for early care and education into a single Department.
- Regulate and support all paid childminders.

12. How important are the following in supporting children’s educational development in early years settings?

	Very important	Important	Not very important	Not at all important	Don’t know
Aistear, the curriculum framework for early years education	✓				
Síolta, the national quality framework for early years education	✓				
The quality of education and training that lead to early years qualifications	✓				
Qualified childcare practitioners	✓				
Continuing Professional Development / training for childcare practitioners	✓				

13. How valued by society/parents and guardians is the contribution made by childcare practitioners to children’s educational development?

Very valued	
Valued	
Not valued enough	Not valued enough
Not at all valued	

14. What do you think is the most appropriate minimum qualification level for childcare practitioners?

Question 14 asks only about the *minimum* qualification level, i.e. the qualification level of the *least* qualified adult in the room. While that is very important, the quality of the service depends crucially also on the qualification-level of the *lead* educator.

Start Strong welcomes the fact that through the Higher Capitation Grant, the State is already taking action not just to enforce a minimum qualification, but also to incentivise higher qualification levels among leaders, at least within the Free Pre-School Year.

In its recommendations, the CoRe report (University of East London and Universiteit Gent, 2011, *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care – A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture*) called for at least 60% of early years educators to have graduate-level qualifications, with a graduate leader *in each room*. Start Strong urges the Irish Government to set a timeline for achieving this target.

In relation to the *minimum* qualification level for non-lead staff, Start Strong warmly welcomed the Government’s decision to introduce a minimum qualification for the first time in September 2015.

However, Level 5 is a low level, and the minimum should be incrementally raised over time. A timeline should be set for moving the minimum qualification level to Level 6. The timeframe for this can be relatively short as Pobal data indicates that 47% of early years educators are already qualified to Level 6 or higher.

While the medium-term aim of Government policy should be a graduate-led workforce, ultimately we should be moving towards a situation where all core staff are qualified graduates. As the CoRe report states, ‘there can, in principle, be no justification for applying different (lower) standards to the early childhood profession’ than are applied to the teaching profession (p.50). All school teachers in Ireland are required to be qualified to Level 8. The same should in principle be the goal in early care and education.

There is no justification for having higher qualification levels in the Free Pre-School Year than in work with younger children. This point applies both to minimum qualification levels and also to the qualifications of lead educators in each room.

It is also important to note that the minimum qualification level being introduced in September 2015 will only be meaningful if it is actively enforced. While a 'grandfather' clause is allowing exemption for staff approaching retirement, there is no case for giving exemptions for other categories of staff. In particular, it is important that no exemptions should be made for CE workers. If enforcing the minimum qualification requirement in relation to CE workers creates transition difficulties for some community-based services, then community services should be offered financial support in some form to enable them to pay for qualified staff, rather than accepting lower quality standards in community-based services than are to be applied in private services.

15. What should be the main priorities of the Department of Education and Skills in relation to early childhood care and education in the next 5 years?

Start Strong welcomes the DES's increased involvement in early care and education, particularly in recognition of the fact that early care and education is in many ways the foundational stage of the education system.

The central governance problem to be addressed in relation to early care and education in Ireland is the split in policy responsibility for early years services between DES and DCYA, with some responsibility (e.g. for supports for young children with special needs) also falling to DoH, and some funding responsibility (e.g. for CE workers) with DSP.

All early years policy responsibility should be brought within a single Government department, as recommended by the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy in *Right from the Start* (Recommendation 41, page 26), and as recommended by UNESCO in their 2010 report *Caring and Learning Together*.

UNESCO's report *Caring and Learning Together* makes clear that there are many successful international precedents for merging all policy responsibility for early care and education into ministries of education. In the Irish context, either DES or DCYA could be an appropriate department – what is certain is that the current separation of responsibilities between the two departments is preventing coherent policy-making and that policy responsibilities should be merged into one or other department.

One critical reason for bringing policy responsibilities together is to avoid a care / education split between policies for under-3s and for over-3s.

Recent policy decisions appear to be enforcing a split between 'early education' through the Free Pre-School Year and 'childcare' for children aged less than 3. If left unchecked, an

unintended consequence is likely to be a downgrading of provision for under-3s. If this happens, there will be both short and long-term negative impacts on experiences and outcomes for the youngest children.

In particular, we are concerned about the decision announced in October 2014 to limit the new 'education-focused' DES inspectors to looking at the Free Pre-School Year. The decision implies that the Free Pre-School Year is the only element of early years provision that is educational. DES, DCYA and Tusla should work together to reform and merge the Pre-School Inspectorate with the new DES early years inspectors, to form a single care-and-education inspectorate for all early years settings. It should be developmental in its approach, and inspectors should be recruited on the basis of qualifications and experience in early care and education.

Similarly, we are concerned that the Level 6 qualification requirement is limited to Leaders in the Free Pre-School Year.

We welcome the active engagement by DES with early years provision, the recruitment of inspectors qualified in early care and education, and the raising of qualification requirements for room leaders. But limiting these positive developments to the Free Pre-School Year flies in the face of the research evidence, which shows the educational impact of children's experiences in their first 3 years and the critical importance of continuity.

It is essential that the same quality standards and supports are applied to early years provision right through the age range from birth to 6.

16. Is there a need for a professional standards body that promotes and regulates the childcare profession (similar to the role played by the Teaching Council in relation to the teaching profession)?

Yes. Professionalisation of the early years workforce is critical to the improvement of quality standards. And to ensure that *all* early care and education services are of high quality, professionalisation must be compulsory, not optional. A core element of professionalisation is the establishment of a professional standards body to promote and regulate the profession.

Given the principle set out in the CoRe report that 'there can, in principle, be no justification for applying different (lower) standards to the early childhood profession' than are applied to the teaching profession, the Teaching Council provides a model for the role of a professional standards body for the early years workforce.

Any professional standards body responsible for the early years workforce must have expertise in early care and education, and key elements of its work should include:

- Establishment of professional standards in initial training, probation, CPD, and codes of conduct.
- Maintenance of a register of qualified professionals.
- Disciplinary procedures for educators who do not meet the standards.
- Promotion of the profession.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your contribution is much appreciated. Space is provided below in case you wish to make any additional comments

Submissions should be returned by e-mail to earlychildhood@education.gov.ie or by post to Tony Gaynor, Floor 2, Block 2, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin 1 by close of business on **10 April 2015**